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THE CHALLENGE OF WEST POINT

BY LOUIS J. A. MERCIER

FOR the second time in its history, the first since the Civil War, West Point has graduated two classes in the same year. The class of 1917 went out in June, the class of 1918, in August, 1917. Both were to step practically from the recitation room, the cadet camp and the practice of sham battles, to the grim realities of the most stupendous war of history.

I shared with a colleague from Harvard the privilege of spending with the latter class the last two months of its preparation in a capacity which gave us, I am told, unprecedented opportunities to study the life and the educational system of West Point.

We had both seen service abroad, and we were invited to be at home to cadets and officers who might wish to avail themselves of the opportunity to speak French and to discuss war conditions in France.

The peculiarity of our position consisted in this, that, whereas officers and instructors ordinarily are separated from the cadets by the prescriptions of discipline and live in quarters apart, we occupied tents in the cadet camp and thus came in personal and informal contact with the cadets at all hours of the day.

I do not pretend to speak for my colleague,¹ nor to discuss here the many questions which the course of study, the methods of instruction and discipline at West Point might suggest, but I had not spent many days at the Academy before I realized that West Point presents to students of education a case so unique that it amounts almost to a chal-

¹ Prof. Louis Allard of Harvard.

lenge. It is this challenge which I should like to emphasize here.

The question still foremost in American educational discussions has been summed up as follows: "The conflict between the education of effort and the education of interest instituted by Rousseau continues until the present time. The conflict between the elective and the prescribed course in college, between the disciplinary studies and the interest or content studies in the elementary grades, are aspects of the same struggle."¹ But it will generally be admitted that of late years "the education of interest" has continued to gain ground, even in the extreme form which Rousseau advocated:

"Whatever may happen, abandon everything rather than have the child's tasks become irksome; for how much he learns is of no account, but only that he does nothing against his will."

Now, the case of West Point is a clear cut challenge to this injunction. The slogan of the new education is "self-expression." The slogan of West Point is discipline.

The "new education" asks: "What will you do, and how do you prefer to do it?" West Point commands: "Do this, this way, and be quick about it!" The "new education" doctrine implies that, unless the student is "self active," unless his activity is preceded and accompanied by a desire due to a feeling of interest in the subject, no real new acquisition is made; for, the supposition runs, without this interest and consequent feeling of pleasure, no organization of knowledge is possible, no new growth of interest, no development of initiative. The West Point attitude implies the opposite doctrine. The new cadet is asked to assimilate and assimilate rapidly and thoroughly the rigid curriculum of the Academy without any consideration of his likes or dislikes. According to the presuppositions of the "new education," the West Point Cadets, faced at every turn with enforced work, should lead a forlorn and dejected life.

Here, West Point begins to force its challenge upon you. As a matter of fact, a happier, more exuberant mortal would be hard to find or one who speaks of his studies with more gusto.

And yet a cadet's life includes a minutely prescribed

¹Monroe, *History of Education*, p. 569.

round of daily duties which would make the average student fairly gasp. Throughout his four years he has to work at top speed for sixteen hours daily. Every minute of these sixteen hours he must satisfy some inexorable requirement. One hour after being roused by fife and drum, he has performed his ablutions, dressed, set his room absolutely to rights, which means sweeping the floor, stripping his cot of coverings, rolling up the mattress, placing coverings and pillows on mattress, straightening books, papers and every piece of clothing, all according to strict regulations. Finally he has found his way to the yard, lined up with his squad, answered roll call and marched down with his company to the Cadet Mess Hall.

Eight o'clock finds him in the recitation room. And there again, the slightest evasion from rigid prescription is impossible. Each section numbers only from eight to twelve men. Every cadet must recite every day. Just as the slightest failure to meet the hundred minute requirements of order and discipline: a paper out of place, a button missing, a piece of equipment untidy, a second of tardiness, is recorded in terms of "demerits" which mean eventually serious trouble, so the slightest falling short from a perfect recitation means a loss of standing recorded in fractions of a hundred, daily, monthly, semi-annually, annually, a passing from group to group; in case of failure, a dismissal, in any case, a final rating which will influence the whole after career.

"Artificial stimulation," the exponents of the "new education" will aver, "the hope of reward and the fear of punishment taking the place of the motive force of interest."

No, the West Pointer answers, but the multiplication of precise aims to be reached, the minute checking up of failures to reach these given aims, a consequent training of the will which means formation of character, the power to bring to completion a distasteful task, to double effort when confronted with difficulties, and to accept manfully the consequences of mistakes and shortcomings.

The important demand is to learn really to bring to action that which is aimed at, and not to be pushed away by any chance impression. . . . Persistence must be learnt. . . . The smallest work carried through with thoroughness serves such training.

The careful, exact, movements in speaking, in writing, in drawing, in manual training, but also the small practical movements of daily behavior, in dressing and eating and sitting and playing develop a refined power of controlling the ideas of ends.

An education which spoils the mind and never demands real effort, which simply follows the likings and interests, leaves the adolescent personality flabby and ineffective.¹

I happened to re-read the above from the chapter on *Will and Habit* of the late Professor Münsterberg in my open tent in the Cadet Camp, and, as I read this precise restatement of the doctrine of formal discipline its full justification moved and acted before my eyes.

The West Pointer is the striking opposite of a flabby, irresolute and inefficient individual. His every movement is marked with celerity and precision, easy and unmistakably pleasurable, the result of multitudinous successful attainings of given ends.

Life in the open air, the sense of physical well-being, may account partly for the ring of joy in the voices, the vim and satisfaction, the splendid quickness of every move. Still, these might well offer further food for thought to those who hold that only in freedom does work bring joy. For the enthusiasm with which cadets set about the work imposed by others compares most favorably with that with which pupils work under the stress of "self-activity." Moreover, and here is the important point, whereas pupils working through the stimulation of self-expression have a tendency to become enervated and inefficient as soon as that stimulation is passed, in short reveal an incapacity to pass to the stage of effort, the West Pointer has developed an astonishing capacity for work, even exceedingly difficult or disagreeable work.

Is not the reason to be found in the fact that the West Pointer, through enforced work, has been accustomed to effort? His daily tasks include, of course, some for which he has a natural liking, and, no doubt, these will exercise a fundamental influence upon his whole career. His original love of horses, for instance, may be the decisive factor in his selecting, as he will have a chance to do on graduation, the cavalry over the infantry or the artillery. But, in the meantime, he has to master, none the less, all the infantry and artillery drill, mathematics and languages, and not only study them but make a high grade in them or stand the consequences in "demerits," loss of standing and even dismissal. Being obliged to make good from day to day in the prescribed work, he develops gradually a certain ability in the

¹ Münsterberg, *Psychology and the Teacher*, p. 188 ff.

subject which facilitates further work, making it lead to the organization of knowledge with consequent growth of interest and pleasure. Enforced repetition has led to the accumulation of new reflexes.

What gives the West Pointer his characteristic superiority, is that, gradually but inexorably, he has been led to tackle the unfamiliar and consequently distasteful work, thus accumulating power which he would not have acquired otherwise. The capacities he has developed through coerced repetition now become self-activities but activities of a wider-awake, more widely developed self than he would have been without this coercion. What is still more important, through proving to himself that, by effort, he could master difficult and at first distasteful work he has acquired confidence in himself and his capacity to surmount difficulties. Where the ordinary student would balk, the West Pointer will calmly proceed to solve the new problem, partly through superior knowledge, partly through the developed habit of successfully extricating himself from difficult situations.

This is where the challenge of West Point becomes clear: Are there not many misunderstandings about the doctrine of interest? Admitting that interest resulting from "self-activity" begets a joyful work, does not "self-activity" depend on the knowledge already organized and, if so, will not knowledge, organized even under outside compulsion, beget larger possibilities of "self-interest" and thus of joyful work?

Is not the acquiring of a large proportion of the powers needed for efficiency naturally more or less distasteful? Can these powers be made automatic otherwise than by numerous rigidly enforced repetitions?

In short, is not work difficult and disagreeable precisely because the organism is as yet wholly without adaptations for it, and if this work is valuable for the further development of the organism, is not effort absolutely essential for this further growth?

If so, is not the general habit of meeting the need of effort (a habit which, like all habits, can only be formed through repeated experiences) a primordial requisite to produce the efficiency indispensable for the highest progress and growth possible, and even perhaps for mere self-preservation?

To sum up, is efficiency possible without the capacity

for effort and can this capacity be developed without training through enforced successful efforts?

Such is the challenge of West Point.

West Point, as the national military academy, is the foremost exemplar of the system of education it represents. Long isolated in its special purpose, its day has now come. With the advent of the war and the organization of a national army, the influence of the West Pointer is to become country wide.

The camps in which the several millions of American young men will be trained in the fundamentals of soldiering will be replicas of the West Point summer camp. All will have to adopt the West Point slogan: "Do it exactly as prescribed and be quick about it." All will know the power which comes from repeated enforced achievement of multitudinous prescribed ends. Thousands of men who so far have only averaged results will understand what thorough efficiency means.

Those who aspire to be officers will soon realize, as the West Pointer is made to realize, that they must attain the best possible development since, unless they are physically, mentally, and morally superior to those they are to command, they will be unable to secure effective control. And all, men as well as officers, will soon learn that, in war, inefficiency meets instant retribution. In civil life approximation may carry through. In war, a bullet is generally at hand to emphasize the effects of incompetence. The need of training in knowing how to act, and how to act quickly, soon becomes apparent. The advantage of being able to fall back upon a full set of habits formed through repeated drills is promptly appreciated at its value.

If many of our educators go into the war and experience the invigorating revelation of the spirit of West Point, there will no doubt be a reaction, in the near future, against Rousseauistic education.

It is to be hoped, on the other hand, that the reaction will not be too radical. For, whereas West Point offers conclusive evidence that the doctrine of interest readily leads to exaggerations, West Point itself is well aware that an education wholly based on coercion has its dangerous limitations. It takes care to provide for the cadets many experiences outside of the class room and drill ground, social, cultural, religious. An essential point of its training, in camp

and field, is to leave to the cadets as much initiative as possible in the carrying out of manœuvres. All, before graduation, have chances to assume the responsibilities of the various commands. This is for the best, and the desire is to emphasize it still more.

The Rousseauistic precept "that the individual be asked to do nothing against his will, that he be guided only by his own natural interests and determined by his own inherent capacities and tendencies" is anarchistic doctrine pure and simple. That it leads to complete disintegration, the morrow of revolutions always prove.

But that the effects of a rigidly enforced doctrine, leading to the establishment of an unquestioning discipline, makes for the best interests of a race, the ghastly culmination of two generations of Prussianism will forever deny.

That they are sufficient to secure the highest type of efficiency is not even apparent. The Marne was the victory of habits of discipline, combined with a surviving capacity of initiative, over the rigidity of a soldiery, made over-passive by coercion.

Democracy, that optimistic and ever-precarious attempt to find a happy mean between autocracy and anarchy, may yet prove the fittest to survive. Granting that it will issue victorious from the present death grapple of doctrines, and that the world will be made safe for its development, the school will have its large share in making it safe for the world.

To fulfill the task of making Democracy efficient, of turning out men and women capable of sustained effort, ready to accept not only the pleasant work of the world but the unpleasant, even to the point of the sacrifice of the self for the sake of the greater good of the community, present and to come, the school will have to complete the synthesis between the anarchistic "doctrine of interest" and the autocratic "doctrine of effort."

West Point, with its tried methods of honest and courageous teaching, its tradition of honor and service, its consecration to duty and country, so soon to be proven gloriously anew, will continue to issue its silent challenge. It would be well for American education to take it into due consideration.

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